



Intermittent **FASTING**

- a dieting revolution?

Step aside paleo, intermittent fasting is becoming one of the most popular dieting concepts right now.

The idea of dieting for only part of the day, or even every other day, seems like an attractive one. After all, knowing that we can indulge in our favourite food “tomorrow” is enough to make food restriction a little more bearable.

A “fast and feast” pattern of eating is nothing new though. We all fast while sleeping and throughout history humans have evolved to manage with extended periods of food scarcity or religious fasts.

Intermittent fasting (IF) is going for a longer period of time – typically 14 to 36 hours – with very few or even no calories. There are many different versions of IF and all have their pros and cons. A growing number of experts claim short fasts can accelerate fat loss and make you “healthier”. As a result, health and physique-oriented people are seeking out IF to keep their bodies in top shape. But is it right for you and which method is best?

THE SCIENCE OF FASTING

Scientists have known since the 1930s that significantly reducing energy intake helped mice live longer, healthier lives. Similar findings have also been found in other life forms and demonstrate that decreasing calorie consumption by 30 to 40 per cent (regardless of how it’s done) can extend life span by a third or more. Animal studies reveal that limiting food intake also reduces the risk of many common diseases through mechanisms such as reducing inflammation and improving blood lipid profiles. Another major health benefit is an increase in insulin sensitivity. Insulin regulates blood sugar to control feelings of hunger and food cravings. Fasting also helps to improve metabolic efficiency and flexibility which enhances the body’s ability to use fat for energy.



« Intermittent fasters need to drink plenty of water.

Research on IF appears to be compelling; however there are a couple of major drawbacks.

Firstly, most of the research has used animal models. Predicting human responses from animal studies (mostly rats and monkeys) is a quantum leap at best. The positive IF data from animals doesn’t necessarily help when determining how humans will respond. Also, very few human studies have examined IF and those that did used poor experimental control groups that limits their predictive power.

Another major problem of IF research is that it’s often compared with “normal eating”. For example, an IF regime that induces a negative energy balance is compared with a typical North American diet that has energy excess and can lead to weight gain over time. The comparison isn’t really fasting vs non-fasting, but more like under-eating vs over-eating. If you look at

almost all energy controlled human studies – not just the IF ones – you’ll find this as a common theme.

So the bottom line is that maybe it’s not the IF method that makes the difference – perhaps it’s just burning more than what we eat that really matters. In support of this theory, the effects of IF on the cardiovascular system and brain are similar to those of regular physical activity, suggesting that the benefits of both IF and exercise are driven by an energy deficit.

Here’s something else to consider as well – when you adopt a version of IF (examples described below) there is usually a reduction in highly-processed, refined food, particularly during the reduced energy periods. So are the benefits of IF also related to the reduction of nutrient poor foods that are high in sugar, saturated fat and low in fibre?

TIPS FOR IF USERS

- **First**, decide if it's right for you.
- **Start** slowly and gradually.
- **Drink** plenty of water.
- **Rewire** your thought process – think of fasting as a break from eating, not as a period of deprivation.
- **What you eat** is as important as what you don't – enjoy good quality foods, at the right time, in the right amount.
- **Pay attention** to what your body is telling you – men and women will respond differently.
- **Maintain** your exercise regime.

METHODS OF INTERMITTENT FASTING

As a concept, IF seems fairly straight forward. But once you start doing IF the reality is somewhat different. Questions to consider that no one fully understands yet are: How often should I fast? For how long? Should I have zero energy? Should I have the same amount of food normally eaten on non-fasting days or should I eat more?

Considerably more research on IF is needed to clarify these questions, but it's likely to be another five to 10 years before we'll see the robust scientific evidence. In the meantime, anecdotal evidence from notable IF proponents such as Michael Mosley in his book *The Fast Diet* has created a new diet revolution and weight loss phenomenon. Here are three popular IF methods as examples:

LEANGAINS

[14-hour (women) to 16-hour (men) fast / eight-hour feed]

A method that is most commonly adopted by fasting through the night and into the morning by "skipping" breakfast. During the fast period, you consume no calories, but black coffee and calorie-free sweeteners are permitted. Maintaining a consistent window of time for eating time is important and workouts should be scheduled at the end of the fasting period (usually at lunchtime). Nutrient timing is critical with a bulk of high carbohydrate foods and energy ideally consumed after

exercise. Whole, unprocessed foods high in protein are recommended and protein shakes or bars are also acceptable.

EAT STOP EAT

[24-hour fast, one or two times per week]

Fasting on this plan is for a full 24-hours once or twice a week. No food is allowed but you can drink calorie-free beverages. The days you fast are flexible and you can choose any 24-hour period that works for you such as breakfast to breakfast or dinner to dinner. What's important is that after the fast is over, you go back to eating normally. Incorporating regular workouts that include resistance training is also required for weight loss or improved body composition.

5:2 DIET

[Five days normal eating, two days of either 500 calories for woman or 600 calories for men]

Developed and popularised by the medical journalist Dr Michael Mosley, you simply eat normally five days a week, then for just two days you cut your calories (500 for women, 600 for men). The two fasting days can be any non-consecutive days and are recommended to be split with a 12-hour stretch (breakfast and then supper). High intensity exercise is recommended with the 5:2 diet, but may be challenging on low-energy days.

SHOULD YOU USE INTERMITTENT FASTING?

There is no doubt that IF has merit from a health perspective for reducing disease and improving vitality through a range of metabolic, cardiovascular and neurological benefits. If you combine these outcomes with the significant body weight and composition reduction that many experience, IF appears to be the magical dietary approach that everyone has been searching for.

So intermittent fasting appears to be good, but is it more effective when compared to a conventional, frequent eating approach without fasting?

Not necessarily. It's a helpful tool but it's not the end-all-be-all of nutrition or fitness. People have been getting in great shape — and staying in great shape — for decades without the use of IF.

- Dr Nick Kimber, PhD, is a leader in nutrition, author, international speaker and founder of the Nutri-Fit programme: www.drnick.co.nz



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